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## Guest column: Early-learning innovation comes to Michigan

*Jack Kresnak and Anthony Berkley*

The best early education programs link parents, teachers and students and create strong connections between classrooms and communities, building an educational continuum. Communities in Michigan are using these principles and creating new pathways that support early learning and success in school.

Calhoun County, for example, has mobilized multiple community partners to create an integrated "Early Childhood Operating System." These efforts surround young children and families with multiple layers of support to help ensure that all children are ready for school and are succeeding by the third grade.

In rural Kalkaska, a federal grant has brought preschools, elementary schools and the community together to encourage and support early literacy skills.

Such ground-breaking strategies can help shape federal and state policies. In turn, federal and state governments must allow communities the flexibility to implement policies that help their children learn best.

This kind of thinking - the creation and championing of innovative programs that communities throughout America can adapt - may well turn this time of economic crisis into one of meaningful and lasting education reform.

And the time is right for meaningful education reform, the kind that hasn't occurred in decades. President Obama is asking states and communities with innovative ideas to help reshape American education. To propel these ideas, two new federal funds for innovation will provide a total of \$5 billion, enough to launch what Education Secretary Arne Duncan has described as "education reform's moon shot." These funds aim to do nothing less than inspire communities to shake up the education landscape.

Young children learn more, do better in school and, ultimately, in the world of work when they move seamlessly from home to child care to preschool to the early grades. Unfortunately, far too few children experience such seamlessness, thanks to a herky-jerky educational system that moves them from one place and grade to the next with no sense of continuity.

Communities large and small are working to change that. Promising early-learning initiatives through a W.K. Kellogg Foundation-sponsored project called SPARK, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids, are working to smooth crucial transitions from home, child care and preschool to elementary school.

The goal: to make sure children are ready for school and schools are ready for them.

Communities around the country are embracing SPARK principles and innovative practices to improve student and school readiness and opportunities for long-term student success. Michigan's Children, an independent, statewide organization dedicated to improving lives of children and families throughout the state, is working to strengthen and expand partnerships that have created approaches effectively linking families, early learning and schools. Most recently, this effort is bringing together

the state's model Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC), local Great Start Collaboratives, the philanthropic community, elected officials, business and other community leaders to share effective approaches and take the next steps to linking ready kids with ready schools.

Efforts also are under way to share lessons learned through SPARK and other early-learning initiatives, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation partnership with IDEO, a renowned design and innovation consulting firm, to help communities improve their learning systems. Instead of relying on outside experts - the usual method for reforming schools - these communities are looking inward, tapping parents, teachers and even students to help generate solutions that work for them.

Communities, school districts and policy makers are creating new ways to teach and nurture young children from age 3 through third grade. Indeed, many communities are heeding what brain science now tells us - that learning begins at birth - and partnering across sectors to develop early childhood systems that begin prenatally and continue through early elementary years. National leaders are taking notice and, more important, taking steps to replicate successful programs across the map.

Thanks to these dynamics we have the chance to revolutionize learning and set our children on a path to long-term success.

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